

Mitigating the Risks of Intimidation and Abusive Behaviours Towards Members and Officers

To: Constitution and Ethics Committee

Meeting Date: 14 November 2023

From: Service Director of Legal and Governance.

Outcome: To review the live action plan in response to the motion approved by Council on 21 March 2023, and consider other mitigating measures to address the issue of intimidation and abusive behaviour towards Members.

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:

- a) Note the action plan set out in section 2 of the report; and
- b) Consider and agree actions in relation to the proposals set out in section 3 of the report.

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1. Background

- 1.1 Over the past few years, there have been growing concerns about the impact that increasing levels of public intimidation and toxicity of debate are having on democratic processes.
- 1.2 In response to this, the Local Government Association (LGA) has led a Civility in Public Life campaign, of which the “Debate Not Hate” campaign is an integral part.
- 1.3 The Debate Not Hate Campaign raises public awareness regarding the role of councillors in their communities, encourages healthy debate, and aims to improve the response and support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation.
- 1.4 On 21 March 2023, a motion was approved by Council which endorsed the “Debate Not Hate” campaign and proposed a number of actions.
- 1.5 One of the actions was for the Constitution and Ethics Committee to consider a live action plan to mitigate the risks of intimidation and abusive behaviours towards members and officers, ensuring safety is prioritised while they fulfil Council duties. This action plan was endorsed by the Committee on 20 June 2023.

2. Main Issues

2.1 The live action plan below has been updated to reflect actions which have taken place since the last meeting.

Issue	Action	Outcome	Responsible Officer	Date
Ensuring members are able to access adequate support.	Raise awareness of the Employment Assistance Programme (EAP) scheme's availability to members.	A lunchtime and evening Member briefing session was held on Teams on 25 July 2023. Twelve members attended at lunchtime and four in the evening. The slides are available to members on the Virtual College operated by the Council's Learning and Development Team.	Assistant Director, HR Services	31 August 2023 Complete
	Provide tailored personal support through Democratic and Members Services.		Democratic Services Manager	31 August 2023
Equipping members with the right skills and knowledge to address issues.	Arrange a presentation from the police on dealing with harassment and abuse in public life and personal safety.	Two in-person training sessions were held at New Shire Hall with a former Cambridgeshire Constabulary police officer. Nine members attended the session on 16 June 2023 and five attended the session on 27 July 2023.	Democratic Services Manager	30 September 2023 Complete
Protecting members	Remove home addresses from Registers of Interest on request.	The Member Services Officer has actioned, following approval by the Monitoring Officer. The information has been removed for four councillors.	Director of Legal and Governance	31 July 2023

	Encourage reporting incidences of abuse to Democratic Services, with appropriate escalation methods in place.		Democratic Services Manager	31 July 2023
	Provide appropriate security measures at Council meetings following risk assessment.	Democratic Services alert the Compliance Manager Resources if appropriate.	Compliance Manager Resources	Immediate
	Liaise with the police in relation to meeting arrangements.		Compliance Manager Resources	Immediate

3. “Debate Not Hate” – Ending abuse in public life

- 3.1 The LGA held a webinar on 26 September 2023 for Democratic Services Officers on the “Debate Not Hate” campaign. Some of the actions identified in the webinar form part of the above action plan, but other actions were raised for the committee to consider.
- 3.2 There are five key principles of good practice which form part of the “Debate Not Hate” campaign.
- (i) Zero-tolerance approach to abuse: establish and enforce a strict policy that sets clear expectations for interactions and promoting respectful debate.
 - (ii) Clarity of process and responsibility: define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible persons who are well equipped to support councillors.
 - (iii) Relationship with local police: foster strong relationships with police to improve coordination and advance mutual understanding of abuse of councillors and the police role in addressing it.
 - (iv) Tailored risk assessments: consider the needs of individual councillors and proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments.
 - (v) Prioritise councillor wellbeing: recognise and consider how your council can support councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries.

Zero-tolerance approach to abuse: establish and enforce a strict policy that sets clear expectations for interactions and promoting respectful debate

- 3.3 The committee may wish to consider developing a short and clear statement which sets out clear expectations for interactions with the public. The statement could be published on the Council’s website, which would enable members to use a link to the statement to advise members of the public if their behaviour is unacceptable and, as a last resort, to end all contact. The other option is to prepare a statement for members to use, if they so wish, on their online sites which sets out clearly the rules of engagement with members. An example from the LGA is attached at Appendix 1.

Clarity of process and responsibility: define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible persons who are well equipped to support councillors

- 3.4 The Democratic Services Manager is the single point of contact for reporting concerns and will escalate to the Monitoring Officer, if appropriate. A regular Member E-bulletin is being developed, in which this process can be publicised to members.

Relationship with local police: foster strong relationships with police to improve coordination and advance mutual understanding of abuse of councillors and the police role in addressing it

- 3.5 A strong relationship with the local police force is critical to ensuring that the police understand the specific experiences and challenges that elected members experience and to setting expectations with elected members as to when it is appropriate for police to get involved. The Compliance Manager Resources is the Council's direct contact with the local constabulary. The Democratic Services Manager, following consultation with the Monitoring Officer, will contact him if appropriate.

Tailored risk assessments: consider the needs of individual councillors and proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments

- 3.6 Officers recognise the role of the Council in monitoring local tensions and ensuring these factors are played into a dynamic risk assessment of risks against staff and elected members alike. Officers also have valuable information and a range of skills, such as health and safety, communications, community engagement and legal, that can help to identify and mitigate risks of everyday councillor activities, like engaging with the public and safely visiting locations in the local area. The committee may therefore wish to consider a generic risk assessment for all members, which can then be tailored accordingly to individual members.

Prioritise councillor wellbeing: recognise and consider how your council can support councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries

- 3.7 The Council has made the Employment Assistance Programme (EAP) scheme available to members, publicising it via two online training sessions. The link to the Virtual College, where a recording of the session and the slides are posted, will be publicised via the regular Member E-Bulletin.
- 3.8 It is vital to understand the needs of individual councillors, as they will not be homogenous across the Council. There are a number of approaches or combination of approaches that the committee may therefore wish to consider:
- Establishing a small working group of councillors and officers involving Democratic Services, legal, health and safety, and other relevant departments to identify gaps in support and share intelligence about common experiences.
 - Carrying out regular surveys of members to understand what incidents affect them and what aspects they particularly struggle with.
 - Creating open door or drop-in opportunities for individual councillors to speak to staff about concerns.
 - Establishing a wellbeing or councillor safety champion(s) per political group who can collect information from the range of members at the Council and pass this information on to staff.

- 3.9 The LGA has a guide for Councillors on handling harassment, abuse and intimidation available at the following link:

[Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse and intimidation | Local Government Association](#)

4. Source Documents

- 4.1 [Local Government Association - Civility in public life](#)
- 4.2 [Constitution and Ethics Committee - 20 June 2023](#)